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Implementation of Task-based Language Teaching in Iran: Theoretical and Practical Considerations

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Abstract

This paper intends to render a speculative but rather feasible version for Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) implementation for Iran context through taking care of two chief and formidable barriers : (1) the nature of innovation , and (2) the suitability and legitimacy of utilizing current linguistically-oriented materials for communicative purposes. Treating Ellis's distinction between absolutist and perceived sense of innovation (2004), Ellis and Skehan's strong and weak version of TBT (2003), Willis and Willis' 'methodological innovations' (2011), Carless's 'situated task-based approaches' (2007), and Widdowson' 'language capability', 'methodological maneuver', and his insightful criticisms (2003) of 'communicative competence' helps to implement TBLT with linguistic-based textbooks and materials . Finally, the teacher's role is taken into account.

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Keywords: TBLT; innovation; communicative competence; language capability

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the 1980s, there has been a cornucopia of materials written for the prominence of TBLT over its predecessors. International Conferences on TBLT have been held biennially at the University of Leuven in Belgium(2005), the University of Hawai'i at Manoa(2007), and Lancaster University in UK (2009) , Auckland University in New Zealand (2011) and the 5th Conference is going to be held at the University of Alberta in Banff in 2013 . Though having received some criticisms in language testing by Bachman in 2002 , Task-based Language Performance Assessment (TBLPA) is gaining grounds at international language proficiency tests like iBT TOEFL and IELTS. Globally using tasks in research, teaching, and testing is getting a precept and more- agreed-upon criteria; fortunately, Iranian scholars and students have

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showed their positive sentiment toward TBLT. Papers, articles, and dissertations by Iranians in domestic and foreign journals bear testimony to the fact that TBLT has been given a second thought, though not a valuable and viable consideration to make some amends for currently –practiced language pedagogy. When faced with TBLT materials both in hard and soft copy documenting Iranian contribution along with foreign scholars' contribution, the writer has felt proud since this global sharing and contribution is worth acknowledging but he feels regretful when he finds scanty attention to local implementation of TBLT in Iran. Unfortunately, with a long tradition of linguistic-based textbooks and orthodoxy in language education in Iran, it seems a Herculean task to change this trend and act according to new paradigms. Textbooks developed for junior and senior high schools have rarely undergone changes to mirror what is happening in language pedagogy across the world.

With these accounts, there has been little attention for implementing TBLT in Iran context especially for junior and senior high schools. Not dismissive of linguistic-based limitation of textbooks and Farsi-version of English materials, the writer is going to render both a speculative and practical framework for implementation of TBLT in Iran. Arguably, referring to textbooks at Japanese high schools which are not designed for TBLT, Willis and Willis (2011) state that this is no reason for not making a start. My concoction is that the dissatisfaction with textbooks and language pedagogy can't be a plausible excuse for total abandonment of new ideas or at least teachers' withdrawal to voice their concern to make remedy as it seems that most teachers are losing their enthusiasm and tend uncritically to stick to their profession. The writer has utilized some insights from Ellis's distinction between absolutist and perceived sense of innovation (2004), Ellis and Skehan's strong and weak version of TBLT (2003), Willis and Willis' 'methodological innovations' (2011), Widdowson's 'methodological manoeuvre' (2003), and Carless's 'situated task-based approaches' (2004) while relating them to Iran context as well as some insights from the Widdowson's version of communicative competence (2003) which is in line with Halliday's 'meaning potential' so as to fix inefficiency of course books and get teachers informed of the potentiality of linguistic-oriented materials for second language acquisition, and consequently accommodate the linguistic-based materials for TBLT.

2. Dealing with the first barrier: a tendency toward moderate (applicable) model of TBLT through methodology

Two factors seem vital and necessary to adopt and integrate a new paradigm in language pedagogy in Iran. The first one concerns the desirable innovation which should enjoy a high applicability scale and provide a win-win situation for the stake-holders of language pedagogy. The other one deals with the coping with and adapting (not adopting) the current materials so that textbooks' shortcomings can be fixed and rehabilitated. As to the first barrier Ellis (2004, pp. 320-1) refers to two kinds of innovation in language pedagogy:

First, innovation in absolutist sense which constitutes a completely new idea. There are probably very few completely new pedagogic ideas, although arguably Prabhu's Communicational Teaching Project constituted one at that time. Second in perceived sense, a pedagogic proposal can be seen as an entirely new idea by practitioners who engage with it, irrespective of whether the proposal has already been adopted by other practitioners operating in different contexts. For example, task-based teaching would constitute an innovation for many Japanese high school teachers of English.

And he also proposes two approaches for using tasks in language pedagogy: a) task-supported language teaching (TSLT), and b) task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the same distinction was also made by Skehan in 2003. The weak version, TSLT, views tasks as a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in more traditional way and in fact using tasks helps internalization of a specific linguistic material. They constitute a necessary but not a sufficient basis for language curriculum, whereas the strong version, TBLT, sees tasks as a means of enabling learners to learn a language by experiencing how it is used in communication. In the strong version, tasks are both necessary and sufficient for learning and in fact tasks are used as a unit of syllabus in language pedagogy. Their distinction also bears resemblance to Howatt's weak and strong version (1984) of CLT, White's Type A and B syllabuses (1998), Wilkins's synthetic and analytic syllabuses (1976), and finally

Nunan's product and process syllabuses (1988), respectively. While the former employs PPP teaching paradigm which stands for presentation, practice and production, the latter employs 'pre-task', 'during task', and 'post-task'.

At first, Ellis' and Skehan's dichotomies may seem theoretically terminological, but they afford flexibility in options which are practically possible and which give a choice between an ambitious version of something and its practical version, though they may sometimes introduce confusions and ambivalence. In all, TBLT can be considered in a perceived sense of innovation in Iran since not only does it carry positive charges among Iranian scholars and writers, but also articles by Iranian scholars have shed light on many aspects of TBT. As to the weak and strong versions of TBT, retrospectively studying the history of task-based pedagogy, one finds two dominant thoughts for its implementation: (1) those who think of the complete adoption of TBLT, and (2) those who favor a moderate and applicable model of task-based language pedagogy. While the former seems to be ambitious to work and even the main spokespersons of TBT have exercised caution to recommend it since they have considered it as absolute sense of innovation. Ellis (2004) acknowledges that strong version of TBLT is somewhat complex and suggests that it may be theoretically desirable, while task-supported language teaching (TSLT) is more likely to be acceptable to teachers. Interestingly enough, even though in the East Asia most governments have adopted the strong version of TBLT syllabus, they are experiencing challenges (Carless, 2003, 2007).

The second dominant thought refers not to the adoption of TBLT but to the adaptation of tasks in existing language pedagogy and thus it seizes the advantages of variability and flexibility put forward to by the treatment of 'weak version' of TBLT, 'perceived sense of innovation', 'methodological innovation', 'methodological maneuver', and 'situated task-based approaches'. Ellis (2004) favors task-supported language teaching (TSLT) which is more compatible with a perceived sense of innovation since it just needs modification not a radical change as the absolutist sense of innovation does but a moderate model which poses little threats and needs adaptation. Furthermore, language teachers are not negligent of using tasks in their classroom, though tasks are not used as unit of syllabus, they are used in the last phase of PPP methodology for using and producing new structure in different contexts in order to get it internalized.

In a similar vein, Willis and Willis (2011) recommend 'methodological innovation' and suggest reordering activities as a remedy for linguistic-based lesson. They refer to this process as 'PPP upside-down' in which production comes first and presentation of special item follows it i.e. the study of language would be subordinated to the application of communication skills. The important thing to be done is to shift the balance of activities from form to meaning. Interestingly enough, TBLT methodology has a close resemblance to the 'PPP upside-down' process. With this re-ordering, tasks get prominence and priority as they occupy the first stand and also teachers welcome them since teachers are not exposed to radical challenges and threats. They have also provided 'tweaking' existing materials i.e. a procedure which needs materials to be modified so as to get learners engaged in interaction (ibid).

Carless (2007) has quoted how government-run curricular innovation for the strong version of TBLT across East Asia has run into problems and how this top-down process has rarely borne into actual classroom practice (Readers are referred to Adams & Newton, 2009; Carless, 2004, 2007). He states that a soft and weak version of task-based teaching seems to be a preferred option in the Hong Kong school context with 'task' being interpreted modestly along the lines of communicative practice and he even uses a more promising and less risky statement "rapprochement" or "compromise" between TBLT and existing practices. This kind of flexible treatment that may prove most feasible was termed 'situated task-based approaches' by Carless (2007), drawing on the cultures and settings in which they occur so that they can be context sensitive.

With these accounts, different nomenclatures for using tasks in language pedagogy suggest that the authors favor a practical, applicable, and adaptable model rather than a theoretical, ambitious and adoptable model and in fact they are seeking a compromise or a middle-ground stand between TBLT and the current language pedagogy.

3. Dealing with the second barrier

The main concern which poses a dilemma and may discredit this kind of thinking for TBLT implementation is that TBLT as an offspring of communicative language teaching is more compatible with a communicative syllabus rather than a linguistic syllabus; therefore, not only has the legitimacy of linguistic-based syllabus already gone into question but also it dismisses works done on communicative competence framework by Hymes, 1972 ;Halliday,1973; Canale and Swain ,1980; Canale ,1983;Savignon ,1983; Bachman ,1990 ;and Bachman and Palmer ,1996.

In order to put a plausible and arguable comment to the legitimacy and appropriateness of linguistically organized materials for TBLT so as not to be accused of an ad hoc solution and remedy for TBLT in Iran , the writer intends to get supportive insights from the 'communicative competence' development .In this case ,no one would give it a miss and consider it as oversimplistic and intuitive understanding of communicative oriented approaches or consider it as even the sleight hand of the writer seeking only an intuitive appeal rather than a solid foundation .

The 'communicative competence' treatment is to make remedy for the limitation of existing textbooks , to seek an opportunity within the limitation of code-based language pedagogy and to consider existing materials as an asset needed to be manipulated methodologically. Additionally, it obviates any excuses put by uncompromising teachers, who may claim that "methodology" can't buy them much in terms of solving a linguistic syllabus to ameliorate their resistance or make them think otherwise to make some amends in their teaching.

4. Communicative competence and TBLT

When Chomsky's linguistic competence attracted a lot of challenges from different fronts in order to indicate his version of competence has failed to account for ability of learners to interact communicatively in social contexts, the concept of language competence was getting rich conceptualization and different scholars helped to broaden its domain to include more components. While acknowledging Chomskyan notion of competence, Hymes (1972) tried to expand it, so he added 'communicative ability to use a language in concrete situation' in order to fix Chomsky's mental structure of tacit knowledge. He states that communicative competence is dependent upon tacit knowledge and use.

Halliday(1973)rejects Chomsky's notion of communicative competence and defines language as "meaning potential", that is as a set of options in meaning that are available to speaker -hearer in social context.He attributes three functions to language: ideational, interpersonal and functional. For him language communication is the product or result of the process of interplay between these three functions.

Canale and Swain (1980), and Canale (1983) analyze communicative competence into four components:

1. Grammatical competence deals with mastery of the language code itself ;
2. Discourse competence deals with mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres;
3. Sociolinguistic competence deals with the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors and;
4. Strategic competence deals with mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action for two main reasons: (a) to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to limiting conditions in actual communication or to insufficient competence in one or more of the other areas of communicative competence; and (b) to enhance the effectiveness of communication.

Bachman proposed a new model of communicative competence or the model of communicative language ability in the late1980s. That model was slightly altered by Bachman and Palmer in 1996 .Their model consists of two broad areas - language knowledge and strategic competence.

Language knowledge

1.Organizational knowledge

- a. Grammatical knowledge (vocabulary ,syntax ,phonology/graphology)
- b. Textual knowledge (cohesion, rhetorical organization)

2. Pragmatic knowledge

- a. Illocutionary knowledge (ideational functions, manipulative functions, heuristic functions and imaginative functions)
- b. Sociolinguistic knowledge (dialects and language varieties, registers, natural and idiomatic expressions, and cultural references and figures of speech)

Strategic knowledge is conceived in the model as a set of metacognitive components which enable language users' involvement in goal setting, assessment of communicative resources, and planning.

5. Dilemma resolved: adapting linguistically-developed material for communication

Widdowson (2003) convincingly criticizes the communicative models advanced by Hymes (1980), Canale and Swain (1972), and Bachman and Palmer (1996) since they have made the same mistake as the previous methods made i.e. they have analyzed language into discrete points with the assumption that the more differentiations the analysis yields, the greater its operational value, while the greater the differentiations of the analysis, the less operational it is likely to be (2003, p.170). Therefore, instead of interaction and interrelationships, these models have included more components. Since communicative competence is used both in testing and teaching, Widdowson states that:

"You just cannot test the ability to communicate, and so it is pointless to try. And you cannot teach it either if it comes to that. All you can teach and test is some aspect of it". (ibid) He proposes his alternative model not on the basis of different components and features but on the basis of the most *salient component* which can serve as the nexus to which other components can be related, so he attracts attention to the pedagogic prescription of what might provide the best investment for the learning of communicative capability.

The most salient component is, according to Widdowson (2003), the linguistic component; however, he suggests that this does not mean a return to the square one, i.e. the teaching of formal properties of sentences in accordance with Chomskyan view of language, but rather the teaching of linguistic knowledge as meaning potential, guided by Hallidayan view of language. Like Halliday, Widdowson believes that "communication is immanent in the code as an intrinsic valency" and focuses attention on the communicative potential in the language itself, and the extent to which learners are capable of realizing it (2003, p.172).

In fact, Widdowson (2003) himself extends Halliday's concept of the 'meaning potential'. Since 'meaning potential' in Halliday's view is incorporated within the actual encodings of the established lexico-grammar of the language, he includes the unrealized resources of meaning which the code provides while referring to the notion of virtual language, the meaning potential inherent in the language for innovation beyond what has become established as well-formed or 'correct' encoding. Additionally, he suggests that nonconformities of learner language can be understood as realizations of this virtual language. The difference is that they do not stabilize: learners are induced into conformity with actual encodings. But they are evidence of a developing capability for exploiting the virtual resources of the code. He goes on to state that language teaching should develop such a capability.

This emphasis on the "code" or "teaching linguistic competence for communication" by Widdowson (2003) is the point that Willis and Willis (2011) have made. They state that learning a language would be more useful on the basis of developing vocabulary and grammar.

Furthermore, one of the major criticisms some attribute to TBT is that it doesn't teach communication. Ellis (2004) argues that TBT doesn't teach communication, but it provides only conditions to make learners communicate through psycholinguistic properties of task development and in dismissing this critique, he says that he does not want to suggest that the linguistic system as meaning potential has no place in language pedagogy and his advocacy of task-based instruction is not intended to exclude other approaches.

Furthermore, he states that the rationale for task-based syllabuses, is largely theoretical in nature, there being little empirical evidence to demonstrate that they are superior to linguistic syllabuses and the argument over whether a task-based syllabus should replace a linguistic syllabus is an unnecessary one, as it is possible to design modular syllabuses containing both types, a combination of task and linguistically –based components. Remarkably enough, he mentions that the failure of linguistic syllabuses may have had more to do with how the syllabuses were implemented, i.e. with their methodologies, than with their design (2004).

6. Code-based language pedagogy in Iran: an impediment or a welcome bonus

Since English textbooks in Iran are to present linguistic knowledge and haven't got to do materially with communicative aspect of language, most practitioners heavily criticize textbook materials as 'out-of-date', 'code-oriented', 'communicative negligent' and so on. The most harsh criticisms that textbook materials have received is that they are not designed to promote communication in classes and interestingly, they are evaluated according to Interchange Series, Headways and every communicatively -developed textbook.

Therefore, it is evident western commercial textbooks would surpass the Iranian-government-developed textbooks. The writer acknowledges unquestionably all the limitations that textbooks suffer but within these bombardments of criticism, rising dissatisfaction, and disappointments for a change, he sees some inherent and valuable potentialities which can work well to make a difference. If we theoretically follow Halliday's 'meaning potential' and Widdowson's 'communicative potential in language' for learning a language, the materials in the textbooks provide us with a priceless asset which has gone unnoticed since the introduction of communicative-oriented approaches as most practitioners think of communication in terms of a different syllabus for which they are longing.

With the treatment of communicative competence, especially with the recourse to Widdowson (2003) and Halliday's notion (1973) and Ellis's treatment of TBLT (2004), we can make a new start, manipulate our linguistically-oriented textbooks, and utilize the linguistic material to make our language pedagogy more communicative and meaning potential. Some guidelines are made by Willis and Willis (2011) and they have devoted a full chapter to integrating task-based teaching into course books.

Following the arguments for priority and dominance of teaching linguistic competence for communication, it is axiomatic that not only the code based language pedagogy in Iran can't be considered a barrier but also it tends to be a welcome bonus which requires teachers to revise their thinking about communicative syllabus in terms of content specification and methodological implementation.

7. The implementable model of TBI in Iran: teachers' role tends to get prominent

To speak of change or modification doesn't involve 'either-or' or rather 'all-or-nothing' dichotomies i.e. either adopting TBLT or staunchly sticking to the old tradition since doing a radical change would put language pedagogy in trouble and might run into problems. It is a matter of degree rather than a matter of being categorical and represents continua. Roughly speaking, implementation of TBT is a kind of rapprochement or compromise between TBLT and the present tradition. Consequently, getting an overall valuable insight from the discussions, it is the writer's conviction that by adapting linguistically-organized materials in meaning-focus language activities through psycholinguistic and methodological maneuver, teachers can utilize TBLT in their classroom. The existing linguistically-organized textbooks, though they work against TBT implementation, can be an asset to develop meaningful and task-like activities. Richard (2009) refers to the key role of teachers in the successful implementation of curriculum changes and he goes on to make remarks that 'exceptional teachers can often compensate for the poor-quality resources and materials they have to work from. But inadequately trained teachers may not be able to make effective use of teaching materials no matter how well they are designed' (p.99). While stating the failure of TBLT implementation in Hong Kong, Carless (2009) refers to innovation in TBLT teacher preparation since he believes that teachers' understanding of the principles and practice of TBLT is generally perceived to be relatively limited and he goes on to suggest further research into teacher education for TBLT in the future researches.

Jeon and Hahn (2006) state that, despite its educational benefits in language learning contexts, a task in itself

does not necessarily guarantee its successful implementation unless the teacher, the facilitator and controller of the task performance, understands how tasks actually work in the classroom. It also suggests that TBLT as an instructional method is more than just giving tasks to learners and evaluating their performance. More importantly, the teacher, who wants to try implementing TBLT successfully, is required to have sufficient knowledge about the instructional framework related to its plan, procedure, and assessment.

In a similar vein, Chang(2011), and Li(1998), have found that teacher training plays a crucial role in practicing communicative oriented language approaches.

8. Conclusion

Implementation of TBT is not just adopting the abstract specification of materials at syllabus level which only demands a top-down process of curriculum development or it is not even a complete adoption of its strong version. The flexibility introduced by strong and weak versions of TBT provides a manageable framework for its feasible implementation even with non-communicative oriented syllabuses since methodological innovation plays a crucial role. The trend toward the moderate version of TBT implementation is evident in the statements and labels made by Ellis (2004), Willis and Willis(2011), Widdowson (2003), and Carless(2007,2004) who explicitly or implicitly favor a change in methodology. Besides the less threatening implementation procedure for TBT, supportive and convincing statements and arguments were made by Widdowson (2003)and Willis and Willis(2011) for the suitability and potentiality of capitalizing on linguistically-oriented material for TBT. According to the arguments made, TBT is applicable in Iran if teachers and practitioners follow the moderate version and recognize and value the legitimacy of linguistically organized materials i.e. textbooks for communicative oriented activities.

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An experience of workshop

At Azerelta's fourth workshop in 2011, after a 45-minute-long presentation about the TBLT, the writer presented a communicative pre-task activity which had the characteristics of input enrichment and input enhancement of planned form-focused instruction (vocabulary and structure) for a reading of Book One of senior high school entitled "The Kindergarten Man" through a questionnaire and took the advantages of the presented vocabulary to make his teaching more meaning negotiated and to get learners engaged while following exactly the guidelines introduced by Willis and Willis (2011) for task-like activities.

Pre reading activity : The audience were asked to give each statement one mark from 1 to 4 according to the following scale: 1=strongly agree 2=agree 3=disagree 4=strongly disagree

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Children need attention when they are alone. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2.Children like to play alone , without any ferried. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3.Children like to go to the kindergarten. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4.There should be flowers and plants in the kindergartens. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5.Sitting on hard chairs isn't fun. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 6.Kindergatens should be like gardens. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7.Children like to do thing with their hands at schools. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8.Kindergatren is an English word. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9.Schools should be a happy place for little children. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

During task activity: After doing pre-task , the audience were asked to justify their choice while reading the text.

- | |
|--|
| 1 Friedrich Froebel lived in Germany many years ago. His mother died when he was a small boy. People didn't pay much attention to him. So Friedrich played alone in a garden. He loved the flowers and the plants .He was happy there. |
| 2 Soon it was time for Friedrich to go to school. In school he sat on a hard chair. All day long he looked at books. The books didn't have any pictures. Friedrich couldn't play. He couldn't do things with his hands. He had to sit on that hard chair and look at the books. It was no fun. |
| 3 Friedrich grew up. He remembered his school and his garden. |
| 4 "School should be a happy place. It should be like a garden." Said Friedrich. "Children should play. They should do things with their hands. They should have books with the pretty pictures. |
| 5 So Friedrich stated a school like this. He called it a kindergarten. Kindergatens is a German word. It means children's garden. |
| 6 People learned about Friedrich's new school. Soon there were kindergartens all over the world. Friedrich Froebel made a school a happier place for little children |

When the reading activity as a "during task" activity was over, the participants were asked to evaluate (pre-task and during task activities) according to the criteria proposed by Willis and Willis(2011). They were









1. Does the activity engage learners' interest?
2. Is there a primary focus on meaning?
3. Is there an outcome?
4. Is success judged in terms of outcome?
5. Is completion a priority?
6. Does the activity relate to real world activities?

Each criterion from 1 to 6 was carefully scrutinized to make sure that it meets the condition for task-likeness.

With a unanimous agreement by audience on each criterion, participants found that using task-like activity in their classes is feasible and it only needs modifying the available materials in a way they render a task-like pedagogy.

Post task activity:

Additionally, using guidelines for developing the tasks were drawn from Ellis (2004) and Willis and Willis (2011), the writer presented a focused task for the use of “Can & Could” (figure below). It was a comparing-pictorial task developed to make students use the target language items unintentionally as their attention was directed to find the differences between two pictures.

	
Jenny's mother couldn't draw a flower	She can draw a flower now
	
Jenny couldn't.....	She can.....
	
Jack	He.....
	
John	